

The Washing of the Saints Feet

"Now before the feast of the pass-over, when Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end. And supper being ended, the devil having put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him; Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he was come from God, and went to God; He riseth from supper, and laid aside his garments; and took a towel, and girded himself. After that he poureth water into a bason, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith he was girded" (John 13:1-5).

There can be no doubt in the mind of anyone who believes the Bible that Jesus was actually, literally washing the feet of His disciples with water in a basin, and that He was wiping those washed feet with a real towel. But the question is: Why was He doing it? And did He intend for His disciples to do exactly the same thing, when He later said: "If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you" (John 13:14-15)? Did He intend for His followers to do this thing literally, just as He had done it, or were they to do something else which figuratively speaking would be washing one another's feet? Surely it is a command, and it must either be practiced literally, or we must have authority for spiritualizing His words and washing feet only in a figurative way. To choose correctly between these two alternatives, we must understand the purpose and meaning of what Jesus himself was doing.

OLD TIME CUSTOM

Some of our friends tell us that Jesus was merely keeping an old oriental custom—that they wore sandals, the roads were dusty, and



By Miles Taber

Pastor, Grace Brethren Church
Ashland, Ohio

The Brethren Missionary Herald
February 23, 1957

it was common to wash feet when coming into the house. That is what Peter thought. When Jesus came to Peter, Peter asked: "Lord, dost thou wash my feet?" If there was an oriental custom of feet-washing, certainly Peter knew all about it. He knew that the custom was for the host to provide water, and the guest washed his own feet. But Jesus was departing from the custom and was washing the feet of others. So Peter simply asked what it all meant. Jesus' answer is both significant and clear. He said to Peter: "What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter." Peter knew about oriental customs, but he did not then know the meaning of what Jesus was doing. But the Lord promised him that it was something that he would understand later. This conversation between Peter and Jesus definitely lifts the act of feet-washing far above the mere keeping of an old oriental custom. It stood for something that an oriental did not understand.

Again we are often told that Jesus was merely teaching a lesson in humility by His personal example. The quarrel between the disciples at the

table is often referred to, and it is suggested that Jesus was simply giving an object lesson in humility. But a careful examination of the gospels will disclose that the quarrel occurred **after** the feet-washing, so that it could not have been the occasion which prompted it.

HUMILITY

It is evident that Peter's second response is based on this very assumption that it was a lesson in humility. When the Lord suggested that the act had a deeper meaning than the mere keeping of a custom, Peter immediately grasped the thought that Jesus was demonstrating true humility to His disciples. On that supposition Peter exclaimed: "Thou shalt never wash my feet." Peter would never permit his divine Lord to take the place of a slave and wash his feet. If humility is the lesson, Peter says that's going too far! No able-bodied man would permit his saintly old mother to kneel down and scrub his feet. Nor on the basis of humility could Peter justly permit his Lord to do the same. Peter is virtually saying: "Lord, if it has come to this, that You must wash my feet in order to teach me humility, don't do it. I will learn the lesson, but I can never permit You to so humiliate yourself. You must never wash my feet."

FELLOWSHIP

Again Jesus must correct the wrong assumption of the disciple. In His answer the Lord shows Peter that this act of feet-washing has to do with fellowship, not humility. For Jesus said: "If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me." That word "part" may be translated "fellowship." So Jesus is saying that this washing of the feet is necessary in order that the disciple may have fellowship with his Lord. Now we are getting to the true meaning of feet-washing. It is a cleansing to restore fellowship between Christ and the Christian.

What is it, we may ask, that

breaks this fellowship? The answer is, **Sin**. For John wrote in I John 1:7: "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another." The believer's salvation is secure for eternity, but his fellowship with his Lord depends upon his walk. As long as he walks with the Lord, he has fellowship with Him. But when his feet wander into strange paths, that fellowship is broken. Then the Christian must return to his Lord, confess his sin, and be cleansed and restored to fellowship. For John writes to believers: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (I John 1:9). The Christian needs to be forgiven, not from the guilt of his sins, but from the defilement, the contamination of them. And the Christian must realize that when he sins, he forfeits his intimate fellowship with Christ. If he wants to be restored to fellowship, he must confess, and the Lord must cleanse, his sins. Feet-washing, as a church ordinance, reminds us continually of our need for this cleansing, and it is an outward symbol of the inward work of grace in the believer's heart.

A SPECIFIC COMMAND

This ordinance is justified then, not only on the basis of Christ's command, but also on the basis of the Christian's need. In these days when the world is so much with us, and our feet are so easily defiled by contact with that which is unholy, we need an ordinance which teaches us that we must repeatedly come back to the Lord, confess our sins, renew our vows, and be restored to the joy and fellowship we once knew. Of course we recognize that the mere outward practice of the ordinance does not produce the inward cleansing of the Christian, any more than the mere outward practice of baptism produces the inward cleansing of the sinner who turns to Christ. But the conscientious practice of the ordinance is an effective teacher of the spiritual truth that it symbolizes.

When Peter began to grasp at least some of this truth, realizing that feet-washing had to do with the

cleansing necessary for fellowship, he changed his attitude completely. Instead of protesting, he wanted more. He cried: "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head." He wanted to be immersed again in the cleansing flood. He was really demanding a second baptism. So great was his sense of need that he thought that he must be saved all over again.

But Jesus quickly reassures him on this point. He said: "He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit: and ye are clean, but not all." And John adds: "For he knew who should betray him; therefore said he, Ye are not all clean." Peter was clean, so far as the guilt of sin was concerned. So were all of the other apostles, except Judas. By faith in Christ they had been cleansed once for all from the great burden of the guilt of sin. They had eternal life, and that could never end. Sinner friend, if you will come to Jesus just as you are, He will take away all of your sin once for all, and you will never come under the wrath of God. He saves unto the uttermost. Christian friend, never doubt the power of your Lord to keep you to the end, if you have really trusted in Him. He that is once washed in the blood of the Lamb will never need that cleansing again.

However, in this statement to Peter, Jesus makes a comparison between two church ordinances, baptism and feet-washing. In effect, He is saying that the believer has been cleansed once for all from the guilt of his sin, and **that** cleansing is pictured in the washing of the whole body by immersion. But the believer is cleansed from the defilement of his sins from time to time as he confesses and forsakes them, and **that** cleansing is pictured in the washing of the feet, or the ordinance of feet-washing. If baptism, which symbolizes the once-for-all cleansing of the whole man, is a church ordinance, then feet-washing, which symbolizes the frequent cleansing of the Christian's walk, is also a church ordinance. And Jesus meant exactly what He said when He commanded His disciples: "Ye also ought to wash one another's feet."